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## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Matters of Life and Death*

by John B. Cobb, Jr.

*Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville. 1991. 122 pp.*

Best known in academic circles as a process theologian, John B. Cobb, Jr. turns his attention to four issues in bioethics. *Matters of Life and Death* is a collection of the Caldwell Lectures the author presented at the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary in 1990. The four topics are addressed in the language of "rights": the right to kill (members of other animal species), the right to die, the right to live and the right to love.

In each area, Cobb raises good questions, presents interesting data, and provides answers that are as passionately proposed as they are very intriguing. This slim volume is valuable for several reasons. First, the style of presentation is good for a wide audience. It is a collection and presentation of the author's observations and ideas, not a heavily annotated tome. Secondly, it would be a good resource to stimulate classroom or study group discussions about the topics covered. Cobb covers a lot of material and presents the thoughts of others very concisely (if at times in a glib manner.) Third, the issues he addresses are very timely, and are on the minds of many thoughtful people today.

In "the Right to Kill," Cobb attempts to dislodge the arrogance at the root of the contemporary ecological crisis. He maintains that inflated notions of human dominion over creation have led us to posit a "dualism" idolatrously sacralizing human life at the expense of the rest of creation, which is too often esteemed merely as a consumer good for the "images of God." This is consistently applied in the next chapter, "the Right to Die," to human life itself. Since "only God is sacred" (p. 52f), Cobb concludes that attributing infinite value to human life is idolatrous. Consistently applying the principles of process theology, under the acknowledged intellectual tutelage of Whitehead, Cobb states that the deepest reality of the human being is not a substratum of essential substance, but the "flow of experience." Once the possibility of this flow is abolished or severely compromised, one has the right to determine when and how one's life should be ended. Love requires an acceptance of the choices made by others, even those to end their own life. According to Cobb, in both issues (animal rights and suicide), the Church's first duty is to repent of its reluctance to adapt to and sponsor these new initiatives.

In the third chapter, "the Right to Life," the author attempts to make a limited case for respect for human embryos apparently to a largely liberal Protestant audience which has been pro-abortion for the last generation. He again concludes that since only God is sacred, the right to life is conditional (p. 74). (One can, of course, question both the assumption and the conclusion drawn from it.) Embryos are not properly the objects of respect because they cannot "express avowed projects" nor do they have established histories of experiences like adults (p. 75). Finally, in "the Right to Love" Cobb argues for a rethinking of the traditional Christian sexual ethic. His reasoning is very interesting: Divorce and remarriage have become morally acceptable in Protestant Christianity. Cobb states that

this is a contradiction of a clear teaching of Christ Himself. Cobb does not regret this nor does he believe this contradiction should be retracted. This being so, there should be no reluctance to reconsidering the other, non-dominical sexual teachings and customs found in Scripture, particularly the writings attributed to St. Paul. Cobb concludes that there can no longer be rigid opposition to same-sex bondings, particularly if there is some hope of permanence. Further, he notes that it would be inconsistent (and hypocritical) to demand a standard of sexual restraint for homosexuals that is no longer expected of heterosexuals. In these areas likewise (fetal and sexual rights) Cobb states that the Church has a great deal to repent of.

The book leaves the reader with no lack of energy and desire to question, probe and discuss the issues and the reasoning process of the author. The underlying theology is clearly that of a process theologian, a consistent application of certain theological presuppositions and principles which themselves could be the object of study and critique. There are several inconsistencies, however. First, Cobb repudiates the essentialism on which anthropocentrism is based, yet his book is centered on "rights" which are objective precisely because they are grounded in the "nature" of the human person (p. 16). Second, he states that "surely, moral questions are not settled by statistics" (p. 62) and later calls for a survey by which the normativity of sexual practices could be determined and promoted (p. 102).

There are deeper theological concerns as well. The reader frequently encounters Cobb's discussion of the "image of God" theology. He seems to equate this image with the human ability to speak and understand language, that is, with function (cf. p. 33). The classical Christian understanding, however, is not functional. It is rather the fact that the human person is created, oriented to, embraced by and destined for the knowledge and love of God, made capable of life with Him now and as an eternal destiny. This, in classical understanding, is why humans have a "right to life." While Sacred Scripture reveals Christ's concern for the birds (p. 22; Mt 6:26 para.), it is only human beings He calls "friends." (Jn. 15:14). This has certainly done its share in shaping "Christian anthropology."

While Cobb rightly notes that the now neuralgic disputes about method are arid and pastorally useless (p. 7), his own ethical consequentialism cannot go unchallenged. Consequentialism (call it what you will) cannot preclude horrifying absurdities and extremes especially in the arena of human life. Any presently operative presupposition about maintaining life in questionable circumstances can quickly be compromised and eventually contradicted by the same ethical rationale (That is, by an examination of a *different* set of consequences.)

Also, as a Catholic reviewer of this Protestant theologian's work, I wish that Cobb would have offered his theological reflections on virginity. Passing reference is made to the celibacy of Jesus and St. Paul (p. 116), but there is no development of this novel, distinctively Christian value.

While any number of other items could be criticized or disputed, I would just mention my single greatest disappointment with the positions developed in this very interesting work: It is not prophetic. It seems to rationalize the current anti-life trends of abortion, suicide, euthanasia, even while affirming solidarity with the "suffering" of veal calves (p. 40). Cobb maintains that the Church's response should be repentance for complicity with whatever is immoral in the four issues dealt with. He never adverts to the fact that throughout history, Christians have been prophetic and changed societal cruelty by affirming the value and dignity of human life, the sacramental significance of genital sexuality, the ascetic and eschatological meaning of virginity, and the Franciscan joy of creation.

I find the rationale of the author to be far from prophetic — I find it symptomatic of the age, self-consoling about the status quo and sympathetic to the justification of bourgeois morality. On the bottom line, there is nothing worthy of self-sacrifice, no incentive to be heroic, no evidence of love stronger than death.

Nevertheless, I recommend the book. It will stimulate thought and dialogue about four very important moral issues. Cobb writes clearly, knowledgeably and concisely about issues other thinkers would prefer not to touch. His bold thought and opinions need refinement and development. I found many of his insights perceptive, accurate and challenging. While I disagree

with most of his conclusions, I enjoyed the intellectual exchange. And this itself is a challenge for theology: to deal with the thought of others always with respect, even if not always with agreement.

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## *Moral Absolutes, Tradition, Revision, and Truth*

by John Finnis

*The Catholic University of America Press, 1991, 113 pages.*

This densely packed short work, representing the four Michael J. McGivney Lectures delivered at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in September 1988, does essentially three things: 1) it clarifies the traditional meaning of "moral absolute" and distinguishes it from recent counterfeits; 2) it points out the centrality of moral absolutes in the Catholic-Christian tradition from its beginnings to the present day; and 3) it gives a strictly philosophical defence of the moral truth of these exceptionless moral norms against consequentialist moral theories in both their secular and religious guises.

### 1. The Meaning of "Moral Absolute"

Debate and doubt about the existence and nature of absolute moral norms arose within the Catholic community especially in the area of sexual morality but has spread from there to include practically every other moral issue. Throughout the debate, the Church, to the consternation of many, has continued to assert the truth of such absolutes, as is evidenced from the following quotation from John Paul II's Address to Moral Theologians of November 12, 1988:

By describing the contraceptive act as intrinsically illicit, Paul VI meant to teach that the moral norm is such that it does not admit exceptions. No personal or social circumstance could ever, can now, or will ever, render such an act lawful in itself. The existence of particular norms regarding man's way of acting in the world, which are endowed with a binding force that excludes always and in whatever situation the possibility of exceptions, is a constant teaching of Tradition and of the Church's Magisterium, which cannot be called in question by the Catholic theologian.<sup>1</sup>

Besides contraception one could list divorce, adultery, abortion, suicide, fornication, homosexual sex, masturbation, lying, blasphemy, murder, genocide, indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations, artificial insemination and the generation of babies outside the marital embrace as types of acts judged to be intrinsically illicit at one time or another by the Church's Magisterium.

All of these norms pick out types of actions or possible objects of choice that can be described in a morally neutral way. They then exclude choices of such acts from the moral agent's deliberation and action. The acts pointed to and proscribed by such moral absolutes are said to be intrinsically wrong. This means that they are always wrong, no matter what the circumstances and the motives. It does not mean that they are *by definition* wrong. Some people think that when Aristotle asserts that "one must always be wrong" or that "it is not possible . . . ever to be right" to commit adultery, murder or theft,<sup>2</sup> or when the Decalogue commands "Thou shalt not kill or commit adultery or steal", that the